

DUXBURY FREE LIBRARY

# Bad calls

## Fraudulent calls leave library with \$15,000 phone bill

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Prior to the town switching over to a new phone service provider, fraudulent calls in excess of \$15,000, were made internationally from the phone system at the Duxbury Free Library.

Department of public works office manager Chris Smythe has been investigating the fraudulent calls for three months. The calls, which occurred from Feb. 7 to 19 and again on March 19, placed calls to India, the Philippines and Jordan, including a 37-hour call to the Philippines racking up more than \$7,000.

The fraudulent activity was discovered when library patrons attempted to reach the circulation desk at the library and were redirected to India. When the calls were reported, Library Director Elaine Winquist contacted CranCom, the library's phone service provider at the time, who came out and checked all the phones and changed all the main phone system passwords, Smythe said.

However, when the town requested the phone bills from Verizon, the company neglected to include the town's long distance bill, creating a gap in the town receiving the bill. Smythe said. When the town finally received the long distance bill in the May bill cycle, it showed \$15,000 worth of international long distance charges.

"Although Verizon doesn't specifically monitor all their lines, you would think anything over 12 hours should send up a red flag signal," Smythe said.

Smythe is working with Verizon's fraud department to try and waive the \$15,000 charge. Prior to reaching the

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fraud department, she spent weeks trying to connect to the proper department that handles fraudulent calls. The town also contacted the local police department as well as Homeland Security due to the geographic locations of the calls.

The town is disputing the charges, but until the matter is resolved, the selectmen needed to approve a transfer of money from one department to another to try and cover the shortfall. Finance Director John Madden asked the selectmen to approve a transfer of \$10,500 from the library salary fund and \$3,000 from library expenses to cover \$13,500 of the charge. He said other funds appropriated to the central building telephone account services would cover the remaining \$1,500.

Town Manager Richard MacDonald said he was contacting town counsel regarding potential legal action against

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Chris Smythe

Verizon and CranCom.

"I am disgusted with the whole situation," he said.

Smythe said the fraudulent charges occurred because the old library phone system contained a feature that allowed employees to remotely access their voicemail messages. Built into the remote access was a second feature that allowed people to dial nine and get outside numbers to connect long distance through the library's phone system.

"It is a stupid feature, because if I am dialing my voicemail, why do I need to access an outside line?" she said. "I understand it is used to forward a land line to cell phone, but it exposes

too many companies."

Fraudulent calls in Duxbury are not something the police department has experienced, said Lt. Lewis Chubb of the Duxbury Police Department. However, through his police training and discussions with other communities in the area, he said it is not an uncommon occurrence.

Chubb said it appeared the fraudulent calls were made through a telephone system with remote access from overseas rather than someone physically using the phone. The utility companies have more information regarding the origin of the calls. Even if the calls were traceable, the location may be so

remote that they would be unable to prosecute.

"At this point we are offering our assistance to the library in any way we can; unfortunately the utility company is in the best position if anything can be done," he said.

Smythe said during her investigation into the fraudulent calls she discovered the problem is not uncommon, and other businesses have also been victims through the phone feature in the CranCom system. As the town continues to work with Verizon, she said it is also looking to see if the town's insurance policy covers fraud or if CranCom's insurance policy is responsible for covering the charges.

The town currently runs its phone services through Capewide service providers. For safety purposes, the system has a block on long distance calling at the library that is password-protected, and the system is checked regularly, Smythe said.